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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 KHARTOUM 000716

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SUBJECT: JEM REBELS ATTACK OMDURMAN, ALMOST REACH KHARTOUM

REF: KHARTOUM 710

KHARTOUM 00000716 001.2 OF 004

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Summary  
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11. (SBU) JEM rebels attacked the sprawling Khartoum suburb of Omdurman May 10 and advanced within sight of one of the bridges leading to Khartoum. Although Sudanese Government forces prevented the rebels from crossing the Nile into the capital, JEM claims that it will launch another attack on the capital within 24 hours--a prediction echoed by even some in the Sudanese Government. Despite assurances by the GOS to the Embassy that there would be no ethnically targeted arrests, there were several reports of ethnic Zaghawa detentions in Khartoum and Omdurman. Appearing on national television May 11, Sudanese President Omar Bashir accused Chad of supporting the rebels and announced that he had severed diplomatic relations with Chad. Three prominent leaders of the Chadian opposition abruptly departed Khartoum on May 10, and the UN reports that Chadian rebels are mobilizing in West Darfur. End summary.

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JEM Attacks Omdurman  
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12. (SBU) Following the May 9 warning from the GOS that an attack on Omdurman could be imminent (reftel), the GOS added additional security throughout Khartoum and Omdurman May 10 and the military was placed on high alert. However, with no sign of rebels early in the day May 10, observers in Khartoum began to speculate that the GOS had invented the story to divert attention from its bombings of locations in North Darfur last week.

13. (SBU) Around 1600 hours local time on May 10 reports of fighting in Omdurman began to trickle in. The GOS instituted a curfew at 1700 hours local and declared a state of alert on national television. Observers in Omdurman heard heavy machine-gun fire as well as the sound of incoming mortars, and by early evening, fires in Omdurman (mostly from burning vehicles) could be seen from the rooftops of buildings across the river in Khartoum. Several contacts in Omdurman reported that the rebels had advanced from the Libyan Market in Omdurman to within a close distance of the Salvation Bridge, one of several bridges linking Omdurman to Khartoum across the Nile. SAF used both jet fighters and helicopter gunships against rebel targets in Omdurman. However, by mid-evening the GOS declared victory on national television and began running images of the charred remains of rebels and their vehicles in the streets of Omdurman, as well as images of captured JEM rebels admitting in broken Arabic that they had received support and training from Chad, and indeed that at least some of them were Chadians.

14. (SBU) Government contacts reported that the situation was under control by 2100 hours local time on May 10 but expressed concern about a second even larger wave of attackers. NCP insider Yahia Bebiker reported that approximately 100 vehicles had been used in the first wave but said it was not clear how many vehicles might follow in a second attack. MFA U/S Mutriff Siddiq told the Embassy late May 10 that "the first wave has been defeated." However, he requested U.S. assistance in calling on JEM and Chad to call off the second wave of the attack. Siddiq said that the rebels had retreated to residential locations and that the SAF was conducting a "house to house search" for them.

15. (SBU) The morning of May 11, Umma party contacts reported that there was shooting throughout the night in Omdurman until 0630 hours local time, when a group of JEM rebel vehicles departed Omdurman heading north. Bebiker confirmed this information and said the rebels had fled via the northern highway in a westerly direction but again expressed concern that the rebels might be regrouping or could be joined by a second wave of vehicles. Umma contacts also reported that there was heavy fighting in front of Umma Party headquarters, across the street from where Radio Omdurman is located--and that the rebels had almost succeeded in taking control of Radio Omdurman (which is a complex housing Sudanese State TV and Radio). Other Embassy contacts throughout Omdurman confirmed that fighting persisted until 0630 local time on May 11.

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JEM Pledges Second Wave  
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16. (SBU) For their part, JEM contacts brazenly reported May 10 and 11 that they intended to "take Khartoum" and would launch a second offensive on North Khartoum, Omdurman, and Khartoum on May 11 or 12. They claimed that they had not fled the city in defeat but rather had left in order to regroup. JEM said between five and seven of

KHARTOUM 00000716 002.2 OF 004

its fighters were killed and 10 were wounded during the Omdurman attack. An independent account placed the number of rebels killed at 17. JEM indicated that their forces withdrew from Omdurman at approximately 0630 hours local time to join a second JEM column traveling from Kordofan in preparation for a renewed assault. JEM asserts that the movement is regrouping near Abu Jabra, Kordofan, a report confirmed by the representative of a rival rebel movement. They denied that any Chadian military elements are or were in their ranks and reiterated their long-standing position that they are not dependent on Chadian support and have built their arsenal through supply raids on the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) during "over 125 battles in five years."

17. (SBU) SPLM leaders and senior officials in the Government of National Unity told CDA Fernandez on March 11 that SAF casualties had been much larger than the SAF will be willing to admit. Another raised the possibility of considerable 'friendly fire' casualties caused by SAF air strikes and artillery. One former SPLM commander, now a state governor, unabashedly exclaimed his admiration for such a bold rebel stroke, remarking "we never got so close in over 20 years of fighting."

18. (SBU) JEM's stated aim is to overthrow the Sudanese Government and to establish an interim administration. They claimed to be in contact with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and are prepared to offer the interim presidency to a Southerner in order to preserve the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). JEM maintains that its actions in the last 48 hours do not conflict with their desire for a peaceful solution to the problems in Darfur or in the country at large. Instead, their goal is to expose the weakness of the Sudanese regime and to force the NCP to negotiate with the other political elements in Sudan. In conversations with JEM, Embosfs continue to underscore USG condemnation of JEM actions and note that recent JEM operations are as reprehensible as the Sudanese Government's attempts to pursue a military solution to the conflict in Darfur.

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Potential for Ethnic Violence  
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¶9. (SBU) A significant danger in the aftermath of the fighting is the possibility of ethnically targeted arrests. While Senior Assistant to the President and Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) Chairman (and ethnic Zaghawa) Minni Minawi publicly condemned the JEM attack and called on all of Darfur's rebel movements to address their grievances through political negotiations, he expressed concern, both during and in the aftermath of the attack, that Zaghawa will be arrested and or killed in retribution. Early in the offensive, some in the regime had advised him to leave the city. Contacts at the Chadian Embassy called Poloff May 10 to report that the SAF had surrounded their Embassy and asked that the U.S. Embassy provide refuge for them (they were at their residences at the time) because they feared for the lives. Embassy has not facilities for refuge for its own staff let alone Chadians.

¶10. (SBU) Polchief called Bebiker on May 10 and again on May 11 to pass the message that the U.S. would strongly condemn any ethnically targeted arrests and to confirm that the Chadians, SLM/Minawi partisans, and Zaghawa inhabitants of Khartoum were targets for arrest. Bebiker assured Polchief that there would be no ethnically targeted arrests and said he would pass the message to others in the regime. He commented that the Chadians were afraid because they knew the Sudanese Ambassador in Chad was almost killed following the Chadian rebels assault on Ndjamena in February. On May 11, CDA Fernandez pressed MFA Undersecretary Siddiq strongly to refrain from any ethnically targeted arrests. Siddiq pledged that the Sudanese Government would focus only on people involved in the attack. He claimed that the Government is aware of who colluded with JEM to launch the offensive, citing phone calls from the Chadian Embassy to certain military and police officers.

¶11. (SBU) Despite Siddiq and Bebiker's assurances, the morning of May 11 GOS security forces arrested SLM General Counsel Abdel Aziz Sam, an ethnic Zaghawa, at 0330 hours local time. Sam was released at 1230 hours local time but told Poloff that he, along with six other Zaghawas, had been badly beaten with rifles and ropes during his interrogation. At 1430 local time on May 11, a Zaghawa student guest house in Omdurman was raided by the security services and 60 Zaghawa were arrested, according to Minawi's chief of staff. SLM sources and other credible contacts throughout Khartoum report widespread arrests in Omdurman, but no conclusive figures are available. There are also reports of large numbers of civilians, who were wounded in the cross-fire, checking into local hospitals. An independent account placed the number of civilians killed at 14.

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KHARTOUM 00000716 003.2 OF 004

JEM Ally Remains Neutral  
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¶12. (SBU) Moreover, while all other political parties condemned the JEM attack on the capital, Hasan al-Turabi's Popular Congress Party (PCP)--which is said to have strong ties to JEM--has yet to make a statement. Siddiq Al Turabi, the PCP leader's son, was afraid to speak with Emboffs on May 10, with the assumption that the security services are watching the party closely. PCP Secretary General Bashir Adam Rahma told Poloff by phone on May 11 that the party chairman for Khartoum State, Adam Tahir Hamdoul, was arrested at 0330 hours local time on May 11. His location is unknown. While they have received no guarantees as to their safety or freedom in Khartoum, Rahma and al-Turabi plan to return to the capital late on May 11 or early May 12. The senior PCP leadership will convene upon al-Turabi's return in order to develop an official position on the recent events, according to Rahma.

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Other Darfur Rebels Observe Cautiously  
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¶13. JEM/Collective Leadership, led by the former secretary general of JEM who defected in the fall of 2007, also does not plan to condemn the attack on Omdurman. JEM/CL leader Bahar Idriss Abu Gharda, who is now in N'djamena, Chad, told Poloff that while he

disagrees with JEM's methods, he cannot dispute the value of undermining the regime in Khartoum. He denies that Chad ordered the attack, saying that President Deby does not want to risk massive Sudanese retaliation.

¶14. (SBU) Representatives of SLM/Abdulwahid, a Fur-dominated movement, and SLM/Unity, a Zaghawa-dominated movement, confirm that JEM raised the possibility of a coordinated attack on Khartoum with them in the last week. Both movements claim to refused any involvement, and there is no indication that either SLM/Abdulwahid or SLA/Unity participated or are planning to participate in a second offensive.

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Chadian Dimension  
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¶15. (SBU) Absent from Khartoum during the fighting May 10, Sudanese President Omar al Bashir returned from Saudi Arabia (where he had been in Mecca for a week for the Umra pilgrimage) on May 11 and proclaimed on national television that the JEM rebels had been defeated and that Sudan had cut diplomatic ties with Chad due to the support received by the government of Chad to the JEM rebels.

¶16. (SBU) Chadian rebel National Alliance leaders Mahamat Nouri, Ahmed Soubiane, Abdelwahid Aboud, and Abaker Tolli departed Khartoum "for the field" on May 11, according to their representatives. As of May 7 and 8, all four leaders planned to remain in Khartoum until at least May 15. UN contacts confirm that Chadian rebel elements have been mobilizing in West Darfur since May 10.

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UN Pushing for Airport Access  
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¶17. (SBU) While all senior UN civilian leadership, both for the UN-AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) and the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), were out of the country on May 10, UNAMID Joint Special Representative Rudolphe Adada is attempting to return to Khartoum from Paris on May 11. The UNAMID Chief of Staff told Fieldpoloff that the peacekeeping operation's priority is to gain a commitment from the Sudanese Government to re-open the airports in North, South, and West Darfur to UNAMID aircraft, per the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The Embassy remains ready to reinforce UNAMID's request with the GOS as appropriate.

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Comment  
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¶18. (SBU) While JEM did not achieve its stated objective of taking Khartoum, its bold raid proved that it can seriously disrupt the normal stability of the national capital. Despite Sudan's turbulent contemporary history, no rebel group has come this close to the capital since the time of the Mahdi. The possible existence of another "column" of JEM vehicles has yet to be resolved, with some contacts reporting that JEM is headed back to Darfur and others waiting to see if there will be another assault. Regardless, the credibility of the Sudanese Government, which was perceived prior to the May 10 attack as having a formidable security and military apparatus, has been severely damaged. There is also a distinct

KHARTOUM 00000716 004.2 OF 004

possibility of changes in the regime's defense and intelligence portfolios as a result of this massive failure of security. End comment.

¶19. (U) Tripoli minimize considered.

FERNANDEZ